

Lehigh Valley Canoe Club Interest Statement on Lehigh River Whitewater Releases

Purpose

To define the views of the Lehigh Valley Canoe Club (LVCC) membership concerning Lehigh River Whitewater issues.

Scope

This Interest Statement focuses on the whitewater sections of the Lehigh River from Francis E. Walter Dam to the town of Jim Thorpe Pennsylvania. Being an organized group of citizens of the Greater Lehigh River Watershed, the LVCC recognizes the needs of the entire Lehigh River basin, and considers these needs equally with the needs of whitewater recreation.

Context

The Lehigh Valley Canoe Club recognizes the superb resource available in the Lehigh River, and promotes improvements to this resource. The LVCC also recognizes the tremendous potential for:

- Recreational opportunities.
- Economic opportunities.
- Water quality improvements.
- Environmental quality enhancements throughout the watershed.

The LVCC asserts that the Lehigh River should be managed in a manner that will realize the maximum potential from this resource.

The Francis E. Walter Dam (FEW) was constructed as a flood control device to minimize the effects of flooding to the communities in the Lehigh River flood plain. While flooding can never be completely controlled, the work of the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) at FEW has saved the Lehigh Valley millions of dollars in property damage. The LVCC supports flood mitigation as the main objective of FEW.

In recent years, ACE has achieved drought mitigation objectives, simultaneous to flood control objectives by raising the water level of Francis E. Walter Dam to 1392 feet above sea level. This demonstrates the ability to meet other needs and uses in the watershed without compromising the ability to mitigate downstream flooding.

A roadway at the dam was considered an obstacle to raising the water level above 1308 feet above sea level. In 2004, a roadway construction project relocated the roadway to the top of the dam structure.

The LVCC now feels that the most difficult obstacle has been removed and the goal of bringing the Lehigh River to full potential for the entire watershed is obtainable. The LVCC seeks the cooperation of the river managers (ACE and the PA Department Conservation and Natural Resources) and all the stakeholders in bringing this resource to its full potential.

LVCC Interests

The LVCC is committed to the following interests regarding the Lehigh River. It is these interests that we seek to have met more effectively through any changes to the flow regime in the Lehigh River.

- Increased whitewater boating and other recreational opportunities for LVCC members, the local community, and tourists.
- Improved quality of whitewater boating experiences.
- Reduced crowding on June scheduled release weekends.
- Increased economic benefit of whitewater recreation.
- Improved safety of whitewater boating experience.
- Improved water quality and aquatic ecosystem integrity

LVCC Organizational Knowledge

Lehigh Valley Canoe Club members have collectively spent hundreds if not thousands of days on the Lehigh River. As a result, the LVCC contains organizational knowledge that can inform and assist other stakeholders in meeting our interests. We offer the following opinions based on our membership's longstanding relationship with the Lehigh River.

- Whitewater boating releases of 900-1100 cfs at the White Haven gauge represent our optimal flow volumes and will best meet our interests of a high quality and relatively safe whitewater boating experience.
- Whitewater boating releases that provide our preferred boating flows between White Haven and Glen Onoko during daylight hours will best meet our interests of increasing whitewater boating opportunities.
- Whitewater boating releases provided on weekends are preferable to releases provided during the week. Such releases meet our interests of increasing the economic and recreational value of releases.
- LVCC considers the primary recreation season to be the first weekend in May through Labor Day. Whitewater boating releases provided during this timeframe will be more economically and recreationally valuable than releases provided outside of that timeframe.
- Additional whitewater boating releases in the primary recreation season will meet our interests of reducing crowding on June weekend releases and of increasing recreational opportunities and their economic value.
- Weekend whitewater boating releases of higher flows outside of the primary recreation season - during naturally occurring rain events, during the end of season lake drawdown, and whenever conditions allow - will further meet our interests of increasing whitewater boating opportunities and will allow paddlers to experience a less crowded river.

- Accurate and timely information on release levels, which give as much advance notice as possible and which are available on the internet and by telephone recording, would greatly enhance the safety of whitewater boating, as well as increase the recreational and economic value of releases.
- An increased continuous base flow may enhance the aquatic habitat of the Lehigh River.
- A dynamic hydrograph is absolutely essential for healthy river ecosystem functions. LVCC members recognize that free flowing rivers fluctuate in flow following daily, seasonal, and stochastic patterns. We further recognize that these fluctuations play critical ecological roles in streambed and bank maintenance, sediment distribution, vegetative niches, and aquatic organism life histories. A dynamic hydrograph contributes to our interest in improved aquatic ecosystem integrity.
- LVCC feels, based on our spending patterns and on peer reviewed research, that whitewater boaters have a large, positive, and under leveraged economic impact on the region surrounding the Lehigh River.

Proposed Flow Regime Enhancement

Based on our experience, and in order to best meet our interests, The Lehigh Valley Canoe Club would prefer a flow regime that contains the following characteristics:

1. Higher daily flows during warm weather months to improve water quality and aquatic habitat.
2. Whitewater releases on every weekend, starting the first weekend in May, and continuing through Labor Day.
 - Release levels should be 900-1100 cfs at the White Haven gauge.
 - To conserve water, the dam gate should be operated efficiently by timing the water release period to provide release levels between White Haven and Glen Onoko during daylight hours only, with reduced levels during the overnight period.
 - Weekend releases of higher flows during naturally occurring rain events, and during the end of season lake drawdown, when conditions permit.
3. Accurate, predictive, and timely information on release levels, available on the internet and by telephone recording.
 - Having timely information will make it easier for tourists to plan a trip.
 - Having accurate advance information helps a boater determine if the water level is appropriate for their skill level.

Conclusion

The Lehigh River is a precious resource to the members of Lehigh Valley Canoe Club. We recognize that many other stakeholders also value the Lehigh River, and look forward of working together with the Army Corps of Engineers and others with a shared goal of redesigning the flow regime on the Lehigh River to better meet multiple interests. We feel that through open and respectful dialog a decision can be reached that will benefit everyone – including the river itself. We welcome any comments on this interest statement or the management of the Lehigh River. We ask that we be considered as a stakeholder in any process or discussions that seek to alter the Lehigh River's flow regime, and look forward to participation in those discussions.